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Civil-Military Relations in Afghanistan: The Provincial Reconstruction Team Debate

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Introduction

In Afghanistan today, few issues are as divisive and contentious as the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) concept. It has become the focal point of a global, often acrimonious, debate on civil-military relations in post-conflict situations. In many respects, the importance of the PRT experiment transcends the Afghan context, as it is increasingly viewed as a litmus test for the application of similar models in other post-conflict environments.

The PRT was introduced by the US-led coalition as a means to 'win hearts and minds' in the context of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). It was a response to growing public resentment of the Coalition military presence in the country and to international criticism of the apparent disconnect between OEF and the wider reconstruction and stabilization process.

The concept has evolved considerably in the two years that have elapsed since the first PRT was established in the eastern city of Gardez, gradually becoming rooted in the Afghan security landscape. The entrenchment of the PRT, however, is less a reflection of an underlying consensus on the concept than the realization that, in light of limited international resources, it is the best option available to address Afghanistan's security dilemma.

Despite the establishment of 19 PRTs across Afghanistan by the end of 2004, no overarching framework or strategic guidelines have been established for PRT deployments, and the wider debate on the subject remains polarized. This was made apparent in the summer of 2004 when the non-governmental humanitarian agency (NGHA)[1], Médicins Sans Frontieres (MSF), suspended its operations in Afghanistan after having worked in the country for over 24 years. Although the trigger for the pull-out was the tragic shooting deaths of five its employees by anti-government militants in June 2004, MSF claimed that its decision had been influenced by the proliferation of the PRTs, which it argued had curtailed the 'humanitarian space' within which MSF and other humanitarian organizations operate.

Military actors in Afghanistan have taken a number of steps to assuage the legitimate concerns of humanitarian organizations, yet a gulf of understanding between their positions remains. At the core of this gulf is the shifting role of the military in the post- Cold War era. The changing geopolitical climate over the past decade has altered the role and function of the military. As the threat of interstate conventional war has receded and that of failed states and humanitarian crises has come to the fore, the military has been forced to adopt new multi-dimensional operational doctrines. Implementing civil affairs projects to gain 'mission acceptance' from the local population has come to be seen as a prerequisite for the success of military operations in developing countries such as Afghanistan. The changing face of conflict has forced military and humanitarian actors to operate in the same space and time. While the military has emphasized the need for 'complementarity' in this new situation, humanitarian groups have been wary of its impact on their ability to remain impartial, neutral and independent - the core underlying principles guiding all humanitarian organizations. Nowhere is this tension more pressing than in contemporary Afghanistan

The Government of Canada is at the forefront of the global debate on civil-military relations, having established its own set of guidelines for civil-military cooperation and having been a major supporter of the Stockholm and Ottawa conferences on 'Good Humanitarian Donorship'. With Canada set to establish a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in 2005, an opportunity exists to set an important precedent for civil-military relations in Afghanistan and elsewhere. This paper will provide an overview of the evolution of the PRT concept and current debates regarding its operationalization and impact. It will situate this analysis within the wider debates on civil-military relations and conclude with concrete recommendations on how Canada should approach the issue and structure its own PRT.

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The Evolution of the PRT Concept

The debate on civil-military relations in Afghanistan predates the introduction of the PRT concept. From the initial planning stage of Coalition military operations, the US military emphasized the vital importance of civil affairs, or CIMIC activities. In December 2001, shortly after the fall of the Taliban regime, the Coalition established a Joint Civil-Military Operations Task Force (CJCMOTF) to oversee civil affairs activities. Under the auspices of CJCMOTF, the Coalition deployed Coalition Humanitarian Cells (CHLCs) in several key urban centers across the country. The mission of the cells was multifaceted: to 'win hearts and minds' among the Afghan population; to secure the support of local communities by showing "the benign face of the Coalition"[2]; to jump-start reconstruction efforts, and; to gain positive publicity for the war effort in the US.

From the outset, relations between NGHAs and the CHLCs were problematic, primarily due to the proclivity of CHLC personnel to operate in civilian clothing and travel in unmarked vehicles. NGHAs objected to Coalition activities on the grounds that it duplicated their own efforts and threatened NGHA staff by blurring the lines between military and civilian actors. Consequently, the NGHAs rejected invitations to attend weekly CJCMOTF coordination meetings or to participate in joint planning and project selection. In response to mounting criticism, CHLC personnel began to don military uniforms in early 2004, yet relations between the NGHAs and the Coalition remained strained.[3]

In November 2002, in an effort to reinvigorate the flagging reconstruction process and contain growing anti-Coalition sentiment, the Coalition introduced a plan to establish Joint Reconstruction Teams (JRT). While more robust than the CHLCs, the initial aims of the new structure did not diverge substantively from its predecessor. Before the JRTs could be deployed, the US, on the advice of the Afghan Government, renamed the units Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT).

More important than the change of name was the new mandate that accompanied it. According to a set of PRT Working Guidelines issued by the Office of the US Ambassador in February 2003, the primary goals of the PRTs are as follows: to extend the influence of the central government outside of the capital; provide a security umbrella for NGHAs to operate; facilitate information sharing, and; and carry out small-scale reconstruction projects. Teams ranged in size from 50-120 personnel and were composed of civil affairs soldiers, Special Forces, and regular army units as well as representatives of USAID, the State Department, and the Department of Agriculture. During his remarks at the stand-up ceremony for the first Coalition PRT in the eastern city of Gardez on February 1, 2002, US Ambassador Robert P. Finn emphasized that the PRTs "are not here to replace the efforts of the Afghan government or of independent donors, but to support them in any constructive and positive way we can."[4]

Although the Afghan Government has pressed for a more comprehensive expansion of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mandate as a means to address the adverse security situation outside the capital, it was supportive of the more limited US initiative. A cabinet committee was appointed to provide guidance and support for the PRTs and an executive steering committee was formed to oversee their activities. The steering committee, which meets on a monthly basis, is chaired by the Afghan Interior Minister and includes the commanders of ISAF and the Coalition.

The PRT concept was gradually internationalized with Britain establishing a PRT in Mazar-e Sharif, New Zealand in Bamiyan, and Germany in Kunduz. When NATO assumed command of ISAF in August 2003, it embraced the concept, committing itself to the establishment of PRTs across the country. By early October 2004, NATO completed the first phase of its PRT deployment plan, establishing units in the nine northern provinces of the country. Current NATO planning calls for a phased counter-clockwise deployment across the country, with the next set of PRTs set to be established in the west. However, shortfalls in resources and a lack of political will among NATO member states continues to hamper the planned expansion.

Reactions to the PRTs

NGHAs have been at the forefront of the debate on the PRT concept, leveling a litany of criticisms against it. They have identified a number of deficiencies in the model, including: its lack of military strength to confront insecurity; its inadequate pre-deployment consultation of NGHAs and local stakeholders; its ambiguous mandate and legal standing; its lack of 'institutional memory' due to rigid personnel rotation schedules, and; its potential for compromising the role of humanitarian agencies through the implementation of aid projects. According to Paul Barker and Paul O'Brien of CARE International, one of the largest international NGHAs operating in the country, "the PRTs have neither the resources nor the mandate to engage seriously in either reconstruction or security" and has consequently become "little more than a distraction from more serious discussions about country-wide security."[5]

PRT Models

The internationalization of the PRT concept has led to the introduction of several PRT models. "There's no cookie-cutter solution for PRTs…one size doesn't fit all", Lt. Gen. David W. Barno, the Commander of US and Coalition forces in Afghanistan, stated in May 2004.[6] In a country as diverse as Afghanistan—geographically, ethnically, economically, and politically—uniformity in PRT structure is impractical; each PRT must be tailored to meet local conditions. This, however, does not obviate the need to entrench a broad set of guidelines to inform PRT behavior. The differences in the main PRT models can be attributed more to the approach and vision of the individual implementing countries than a desire to customize the concept to meet local conditions. The following analysis will describe the two dominant PRT models to emerge over the past year, that of the US and the UK.

US Model

The US model has attracted much of the criticism directed at the PRT concept. Among the areas that have aroused the ire of the NGHAs are its inordinate focus on implementing small-scale, 'quick-impact' development projects; its tendency to operate out of uniform and in unmarked vehicles, and; its use of aid conditionality.[7]

Another contentious issue concerns the ambiguity surrounding its political identity and underlying objectives. While Lt. General Barno has affirmed that the PRT was established to "meld" the security and reconstruction missions of the U.S. and "extend the reach of the central government", many of its activities are geared primarily to advance the military objectives of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF).[8] It has become clear over the past three years that the goals of OEF and that of the wider Afghan reconstruction process can be incompatible. An incident highlighting this reality took place in Ghazni province in 2004, where the Coalition, operating on locally gleaned intelligence, fired rockets at a village, mistakenly killing nine children and one man. When PRT personnel arrived some weeks later to offer their condolences and implement development projects, they were rebuffed by the local community.[9] The incident fostered anti-coalition sentiment and strained relations between the local population and NGHAs working in the region, hampering their ability to deliver development assistance.

UK Model

The UK PRT model, operationalized in Mazar-e Sharif, is considered to be the closest approximation to the NGHA vision of the PRT. A 2004 Report of Save the Children, UK, praises the UK PRT for "having a more precise 'concept of operations'."[10] Security sector reform, support to institution-building, and the promotion of economic development have been identified as its central priorities. It has also positioned itself as a vital intermediary between local factions. The security-centric orientation of the UK PRT has met the demands of local and international NGHAs. Although the limited combat capacity of the team prevents it from undertaking offensive operations to combat insurgents and limit the power of local warlords, it remains highly visible in the community, embarking on regular patrols in high-risk areas. Its presence alone has deterred militant attacks and the outbreak of large-scale factional clashes.

Recommendations

The NGHA community in Afghanistan has expressed legitimate concerns about the actions of the PRTs. However, the uncompromising nature of the positions adopted by many NGHAs has not positively contributed to the formulation of a solution to the impasse. The onus for change seems to have been placed solely on the military, which is neither realistic nor reasonable.

Devising uniform guidelines for any program implemented on a country-wide level in Afghanistan risks ignoring the complexity of the situation on the ground. However, it is important to set broad parameters for PRT action, to guide the establishment of new PRTs and reformulate existing PRT structures. The following set of recommendations seeks to provide an outline of parameters that can be put in place.

PRTs should focus on security

The PRTs should exploit their comparative advantage by directing their resources to security rather than reconstruction activities. The presence of a PRT, while largely symbolic, will serve as a powerful deterrent to violence and factional tension. However, it is vital that realistic expectations are set for the PRT. It is not a substitute for ISAF expansion and lacks the capacity to launch offensive operations or to intervene in large-scale factional disputes.

PRTs should refrain from providing humanitarian assistance unless in emergency situations

It is clear that NGHAs in Afghanistan are better placed to deliver humanitarian assistance than military actors in most situations, and can often do so at a lesser cost. Accordingly, PRTs should not engage in activities that are traditionally the purview of humanitarian actors or well-placed local NGHAs. This includes the areas of health, education, water, and the provision of food aid. Only in extreme emergencies, such as a humanitarian catastrophe or natural disaster, should this policy be overridden.

PRTs should focus on infrastructural rehabilitation and security sector reform rather then 'quick impact' development projects

An area where PRTs could make a significant contribution to the reconstruction process that would complement rather than conflict with the work of NGHAs is in the rehabilitation of government infrastructure and capacity at the local level, (the refurbishment and provision of equipment for offices and facilities) and support for security sector reform (training and mentoring of Afghan security forces and support for the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of ex-combatants).

PRT activities should be clearly differentiated from those of humanitarian actors

In several regions of Afghanistan, the risks to humanitarian actors have increased over the past year. However, this must be viewed in the overall context of the security situation. The targeting of aid workers represents a pragmatic tactical shift in the approach of anti-government spoiler groups more than it does growing confusion regarding the distinction between military and civilian actors. A recent NGHA report admits that "it is difficult to assess the extent to which this perception (of humanitarian workers associated with the work of foreign military contingents) would prevail even in the absence of PRTs."[11] Regardless, stringent measures must be taken to clearly distinguish hu-

manitarian workers from their military counterparts.

PRTs must be 'owned' by local communities and the central government

As the PRT is intended to be a vehicle to expand the writ of the central government throughout the country, Afghan stakeholders should have decisive influence over their design and direction. A representative of the government should be embedded in each PRTs and, along with local community leaders, should participate in the process to determine what projects the PRT undertakes.

PRTs should institutionalize coordination mechanisms with NGHAs

It is incumbent on the PRTs to form good operational relationships with local NGHAs that will allow them to draw on their wide experience. Information sharing is one practical area where both sides can derive mutual benefit, the PRTs by enhancing their understanding of local cultural and political dynamics and the NGHA community by gaining important security information and advice. An important caveat, however, is that any intelligence garnered by military forces from NGHAs must be handled responsibly. If local communities perceive the NGHAs as agents or informants for the PRTs, it could undermine their legitimacy and credibility.

Recommendations for Canada's Provincial Reconstruction Team

The establishment of a Canadian PRT offers an opportunity to set a new standard for how PRTs are structured and operated in Afghanistan. A Canadian PRT model should mirror its British equivalent in the adoption of a peacebuilding and security approach. It should differ by dedicating greater attention to the improvement of local governance and judicial reform - areas that have received insufficient attention and where Canada can add significant value.

A Canadian PRT could carry out a number of specific functions including: training and mentoring civil servants, judicial personnel and local security forces; supporting the Afghan Stabilization Programme (ASP), an Afghan initiative to rebuild local governance capacity and infrastructure at the district and provincial levels across the country; supporting the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process, and; serving as an interlocutor for local disputes and a link to the central government.

Conclusion

The situations in Afghanistan and Iraq have clearly demonstrated that the task of winning the war in today's world pales in complexity to that of winning the peace. While the former has traditionally fallen within the domain of the military, the latter has also increasingly been looked upon as a military responsibility.

As the role of the military has broadened, it has overlapped with the mandates of civilian aid agencies, causing significant friction. The initial reactionary positions adopted by NGHAs has gradually given way to a more open and fluid process of redefining the concepts of neutrality, independence, and impartiality that have formed the bedrock of humanitarian action. The complexity of this enterprise is reflected in the debate on the PRT in Afghanistan. The emergence of new PRT models - ones more attuned to NGHA concerns - has shown that the goals of humanitarian organizations and the military are not incompatible, and in fact can be mutually reinforcing.

The PRT is an imperfect solution to Afghanistan's security and development dilemma. But if structured appropriately, it can have a substantial and positive impact.

Notes:

[1]The term 'non-governmental humanitarian agencies' (NGHAs), which is utilized throughout this paper, encompasses national and international humanitarian non-governmental organizations (NGOs); the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC); and the humanitarian agencies within the UN system.

[2]See Fields, Kimberly (2003). *Civil Military Relations: A Military Civil Affairs Perspective.* Paper presented at Carr Center for Human Rights Policy event: 'Prospective Military Operations in Iraq: Humanitarian Implications and Considerations Workshop', Washington DC, 21-22 January

[3]See Fields.

[4]Address by Robert P. Finn, Ambassador to Afghanistan, in Gardez, Afghanistan, 1 February 2003.

[5]O'Brien, Paul and Paul Barker (2003). 'Old Questions Needing New Answers: A Fresh Look at Security Needs in Afghanistan' in *Confronting Afghanistan's Security Dilemma: Reforming the Security Sector.* ed. Mark Sedra. Bonn: BICC, p. 20.

[6]Barno, David W. (2004). *Afghanistan: The Security Outlook.* Address delivered at the Center for Security and International Studies (CSIS), Washington, D.C., 14 May, p. 14.

[7]A US PRT in Zabul Province distributed leaflets that threatened to halt aid if useful intelligence was not provided. The practice was discontinued due to public criticism. See Save the Children, UK, p. 40.

[8]Barno, p. 10.

[9]Save the Children, UK (2004). *Provincial Reconstruction Teams and Humanitarian-Military Relations in Afghanistan.* London, Save the Children, pp. 23-24

[10]Save the Children, UK, p. 20.

[11]Ibid, p. 34.

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